

**October 23, 2008**



**An Interview With:**

## **OKLAHOMA COACH JEFF CAPEL**

PETER IRWIN: Coach Jeff Capel is here from Oklahoma. Opening comments.

COACH CAPEL: Glad to be here in Oklahoma City. Really excited to have the Big 12 Tournament back here. We thought it was a tremendous success overall a couple of years ago. I thought the fans here did a great job of coming out and supporting the tournament, and we're just really excited to have it back. I'm excited to be able to be in practice mode right now. We've had five really good days of practice.

I really like our team. I like the guys we have returning and the guys we've added. It's going to be important for us to continue to work hard every day and stay together. Guys focusing on being great teammates. And if we do that, I like our chances of becoming a really good basketball team.

PETER IRWIN: Questions.

**Q. Talk about how far the regard for your program has come in so short a period of time and what are the factors that have to fall into place for you to achieve what folks expect this season?**

COACH CAPEL: Well, I was asked the question earlier this morning: Did you see this maybe happening when you first got here, in two years being at this point? And I said no. I'm not one of these guys that looks too far ahead. I try to focus on the moment.

Certainly we wanted to be at a point where we felt like we had a chance to compete for conference championship. I probably started thinking that when we got Blake, when he committed and we signed him, that there's a real possibility that that could happen.

The big thing, obviously, was when he decided to come back for a sophomore year. Then

we started thinking about it even more. What has to happen for us first and foremost we have to stay healthy, that's the big thing. We have to stay healthy. And then we have to stay together. And we have to earn the right to be a really good basketball team.

And you do that by how well you practice, by how well you take care of yourself, both on and off the floor. And we have to stay together. And we have to defend at a high level, rebound at a high level, and we have to be able to score.

If we do that, then, like I said, I like our chances of being right there with anyone.

**Q. Can you talk about just the depth of the Big 12 Conference in general this season and then the difficulties of playing the Big 12 South, just such a loaded division?**

COACH CAPEL: I think this year is up for grabs probably more than any year I've been here. The past two years you looked at Kansas and Texas being the two schools that were probably a little bit better, more talented than everyone. And I think this year you look at those two teams again but Baylor I think is talented as anyone. I think we're a pretty talented basketball team. A&M has some guys back. Missouri has some guys back. Oklahoma State, especially in the back court, are very talented.

And so I think it is up in the air for everyone. And everyone has a chance. And I think that's what makes this year really, really exciting for everyone.

**Q. Talk about Willie Warren, would you? He's probably one of the most high-profile kids coming into the league, how his play will affect your expectations.**

COACH CAPEL: Willie is a really talented young man. Most people know about his ability to score the basketball. And he's certainly shown in five practices in the workouts that we've done that he can really score. And he can do it in different ways.

The thing that we've tried to get him to

understand and focus on is to become a really good defender. I think he has the ability to do that, because of his size, his strength and athleticism. And that's probably the thing I've been most pleased with.

In the six practices that we've had, in five of them he's been at a really, really high level on both sides of the ball. And that's something that's really difficult for freshmen, also a guy that's scored his whole life to understand how important it is to defend.

And so I think he's been willing to do that and willing to listen. I think it really helps that he has a guy like Blake Griffin as a teammate that's kind of been through some of the things he's been through. To have a guy like Tony Crocker, who started and played a lot as a freshman, to have a guy like Austin Johnson who started some and played a lot as a freshman to kind of help him with this experience.

Also, I think it helps -- and this is where it's different from Blake -- where he's not looked at, Willie is not looked at to be the guy. When Blake came here as a freshman, he was kind of anointed by everyone as the guy.

We need Willie to come in and be a big part, but we don't necessarily need him to be the guy. And I think that's going to help him.

**Q. Can you talk about the big guy, Blake's maturity, how his game has matured? Because he's added a bit of length to his shot. He can maybe get a little further from the basket now.**

COACH CAPEL: I think he's matured as a person, which has helped him as a player. The experiences that he went through last year, you know, both on and off the floor help. You're talking about a kid whose life changed probably in late December, early January, to where he was mentioned like the rest of those, like a Rose and like a Beasley. When he came in, not many people nationally thought of him that way. We certainly did.

But I think he thought of himself as being as good as those guys. But it was really after that West Virginia game where people started to take notice.

And so the young man's life changed completely. And all of a sudden he was forced to make a decision that could impact the rest of his life. And I think he made the right decision in coming back, because I think the experience that

he'll go through this year is going to help him so much for the rest of his life.

Obviously his game has matured. He's in better shape. He knows how to be more prepared for a season. I think he's grown a little bit, if that's possible. But I think because he's in better shape, I think he's a little bit more explosive, and I think he's a better basketball player.

His IQ has gone up. He's shooting the ball a lot better now. And he's just more mature. Little things don't bother him as much as they did maybe early in the season last year.

And hopefully with all of that I definitely think it's going to make our team a lot better.

**Q. Talk about your point guard play, what you think that will look like as the season develops.**

COACH CAPEL: Well, for us, last year, when Austin Johnson played well, we won. And he's going to be a big key this year. Obviously, you can have Willie Warren there at the point sometimes for us. And then Omar Leary is the guy in our program that's probably the only true point guard. Will probably have more of a lead guard the majority of the time out there.

Omar has played really well in the practice and the workouts. We've been really pleased with his progress going into his second year.

But as anyone knows, it's the most important position on the floor. And we feel like we have three guys that are capable of doing that for us at a very, very high level.

**Q. How surprised were you that Blake decided to come back? Were there any tense moments, and in retrospect, is it a more impressive decision given how many kids decided to leave?**

COACH CAPEL: I don't know if I was surprised. He's a really unique kid. When people ask -- I mean, he's really unique. And certainly there was concern. There was great concern. Right after we lost to Louisville last year, when we got back to Norman that night, I remember sending Blake a text and I said to him, look, we need to get together and talk.

There are a lot of rumors flying around out there about both of us. And I said let's take a couple of days and let's just kind of let this die down a little bit, the season, the sting of how we just lost and let's get together.

We got together. The first thing I said, "I'm going to support you in whatever you want, I want you to do what you want to do. If you want to turn pro, let's turn pro. Let's go." I assured him at that moment that I wasn't going anywhere. But I didn't want him to base his decision on that. I wanted that decision to be on what he thought was best for him.

And after about two weeks, it was actually right after I got back from the Final Four is when he told me that he was going to stay.

And so I don't know if I was that surprised by it. Like I said, because he's a unique young man. And I think because of that that's why -- he's a kid that doesn't follow the norm. He doesn't follow kind of what everyone else is doing. He makes decisions based on what he thinks are best for him.

I think that's one of the reasons why he chose the University of Oklahoma over some of the other places that were recruiting him, especially at the time in which he chose.

When he made his decision to come to us in May, he committed in May. We still hadn't gone in front of the infractions committee, so you didn't know what was going to happen.

But he made the decision based on what he felt was best for him. Like I said, it's one of the things that makes him really, really unique.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you, Coach.

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